

Imagining change: a short history of radical film in the U.S.A.

by Chuck Kleinhans

Preface

I was asked to give the opening keynote address to the Radical Film Network gathering in New York City, May 3, 2017. RFN was organized by two British scholars who received a grant to run several events. They had two conferences in the UK in earlier years and decided to have the third one in NYC with the aim of international expansion. The NYC situation allowed for the conference to take place the three days before the month long Workers Unite! Film festival that takes place at different venues around the city every May.

I didn't attend the earlier events in the UK, but I was eager to attend this one. In retrospect I think it made a healthy advancement of the organization's goals. I also wrote up a set of reflections after the event which I'll post separately. I've elaborated a few points here that came up in the Q&A after my talk.

Alex Juhasz, media teacher/scholar/activist, gave me a very flattering introduction.

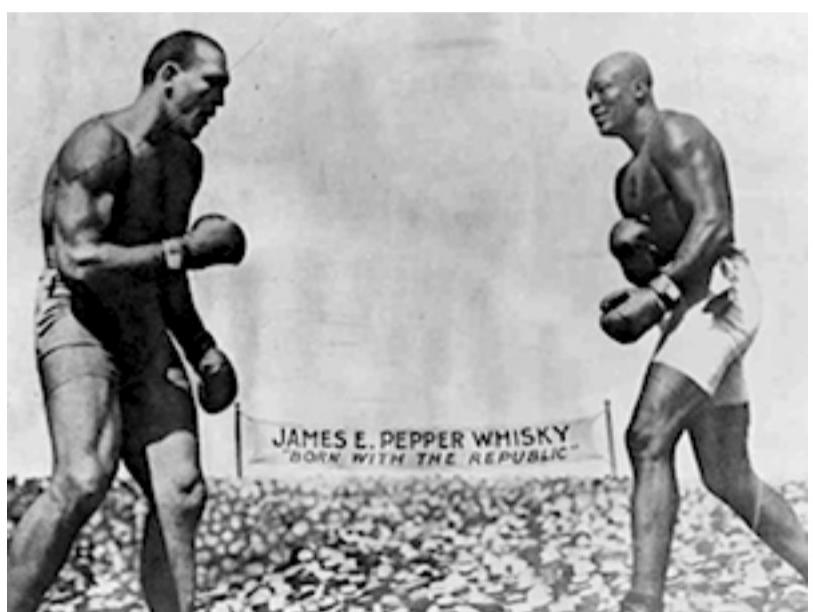


Workers Leaving the Factory (Lumière)
(Note that many of the workers here are women)

Thanks for that introduction, Alex. I want to thank Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, Andrew Tilson, and the other organizers of this wonderful event for inviting me to talk to you today. And, it's great to be back in New York City, a sanctuary city, which on Monday, May Day, the international worker's day, held a number of number of rallies and demonstrations for immigrant workers (as did other U.S. cities).



A Corner in Wheat (D. W. Griffith, 1909)



Johnson-Jeffries fight (1910)



The Immigrant (Chaplin, 1917)
Modern Times (Chaplin, 1936)

I was asked to discuss the history of radical film in the U.S. providing a perspective on the situation we find ourselves in today, and hopefully, I'll add, looking to what we might accomplish in the future. Obviously we now live in interesting times and a new energized discussion is taking place among activists in the wake of recent electoral events. I don't want to address that discussion here. I think we will all be referring to it both formally and informally during the conference, and we can learn from each other.

Similarly, I'm working from a broad understanding of the term "radical." My own interest has always been to look at things from the perspective of grass roots activism encompassing issues of class, race and ethnicity, gender, and so forth and with an international and cross-cultural perspective. And oh, I should probably mention that I've been a working photographer, and made films and videos.

I want to address three large topics today. One is to take a longitudinal look, an historical survey, of radical film. Second is to take a latitudinal regard, to move from the usual focus on specific films and makers to include other agents in the much larger process of funding, production, distribution, exhibition, political organizing, curating, archiving, and teaching. Third is to consider the role of new and changing technologies in radical media opportunities in the past, present, and future.

History

From the very start of film, the working class has been present in film, although usually without a voice or without their perspective.

The power of moving image photography, adding to a previous activist practice of using photography for social and political reform, such as depicting the conditions of the poor, was seen as an important tool by reformists, both liberal and radical. And, we might remember, even by conservatives, as in D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* which contrasts the opulence of the rich and the misery of the poor caused by a capitalist speculator in the grain market. By apparently divine justice, he dies buried in wheat.

The potential of filmmaking for effective propaganda for a social and political cause inspired early efforts in the U.S. and the U.K., for issues such as women's suffrage, healthcare reform, poverty, and so forth. Early in the 20th century, we see film used for documentation, and for dramatic narration of important issues. So: to show and to persuade.

And let me remind us of the importance of visual evidence: of showing in a way that earlier was conveyed through the extensive filter of words, of journalism within the framework of the capitalist press. The footage of Jack Johnson, the famous boxer, itself was considered so potent at showing a black man beating a white boxer, that it was often censored by cities and by states, as the man himself was attacked by white opinion (and at the same time provided a powerful image for African Americans).

Thus, it's not always the precise *intention* of moving images that accounts for everything. We also have to understand the history of how films were seen and used by the audience.

In addition to actuality presentations and social reform efforts, we know that throughout the Teens and Twenties entertainment cinema appealed to the working class, and while I won't get into that here, I want to note that comedy, particularly in the figure of Chaplin's Little Tramp, stood for and gave an empathetic validation to the dispossessed, picturing Charlie as clever, resourceful, and an active agent in facing opposing forces.



The Spanish Earth, (Joris Ivens 1937)



Columbia Revolt (NY Newsreel, 1968)



The Brig (Jonas Mekas, 1964)

Two other moments from the 1920s should be mentioned here: the full flowering of a radical film movement in the Soviet 20s, with innovative directors seizing the opportunity to build on earlier developments in film form and narrative for a directly politically informed body of work, though it would become better known in the West in the 1930s. And, without the resources of state sponsorship, independent artists working in the Surrealist and Dada movements created the first examples of an artisan cinema that often addressed political topics.

Both of these movements inspired people in the U.S. in the 1930s to develop the Film and Photo League and begin the production of working class activist films. The Film and Photo League worked with labor organizing lead by the Communist Party, and in that framework also showed Soviet films and was thus an important starting point for directly political filmmaking, supporting not only documentation of actual strikes and protests from a ground-level point of view, but contributing to international efforts such as support for Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

This period marks the start of a sustained social documentary movement in the U.S. (detailed in the standard histories such as Eric Barnouw and Jack Ellis) that is often linked to liberal-progressive films of the era such as Roosevelt administration policy promotions for rural electrification and water resource management. And in passing, I think it's worth noting that we have often looked at many films of this era and in this tradition as "liberal" or "mildly progressive" rather than truly class-consciously radical. (I've said that in teaching and writing.) But looking back from the current neoliberal shredding of the social contract and the destruction of public goods such as clean drinking water, and the capitalist takeover of such essentials as healthcare and education, we might want to reconsider those films as promoting basic rights.

These films and their filmmakers showed that cinema could be a powerful force for influencing public opinion, for showing otherwise hidden events and situations, and adding to the visual imagination of political understanding. And WW2 accelerated media use in the service of national policy and practice. For military training, for industrial education, for propaganda film production--all of which was outside of the Hollywood studio system--there was a vast expansion of filmmaking, particularly in 16mm form. After the war this also produced a huge surplus of film technology: film projectors went to K-12 classrooms, and a new educational film market developed. Film cameras and discount film stock were available for independent filmmaking. And new markets appeared: for television journalism, for advertising, and for industrial use.

That change in the infrastructure provided the basis for a new wave of politically motivated radical film in the 1960s. The fiercely militant film. *Columbia Revolt* (1968) by New York Newsreel could come into being precisely because of earlier work by a wide variety of progressive filmmakers: some of them artists and some of them journalists and some of them people with something to say who realized that it really was now within their grasp to make a film.

For example, the artist: immigrant from Lithuania and antiwar activist : Jonas Mekas, *The Brig* (1964) interpreted last outlaw performance of the Living Theatre's production of the anti-military play by Kenneth Brown, at the start of the U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War.

And earlier, the journalist: Edward R. Murrow's report on migrant farm labor, *Harvest of Shame*, shown Thanksgiving evening on a major network.

And individuals and local groups: Edward Bland et al. who made an amazing polemic about African American culture in *The Cry of Jazz*.

The 60s also marked an important change in the U.S. radical film scene as international films brought new topics and ideas into public discussion in the US.



Harvest of Shame (CBS Reports series, 1960, Edward R. Murrow, Fred W. Friendly, and David Lowe)



The Cry of Jazz (Edward Bland et al., 1959)



The Battle of Algiers (Pontecorvo, 1965)

In particular the works of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave gave younger audiences new ways of imagining the world, their place in it, and how to understand it. These challenging films became part of a common core of this generation's intellectual development, and often the most compelling way to consider ethics, politics, personhood, and being engaged in the world. New work from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Hungary opened eyes to another view of socialist society. And films such as *The Battle of Algiers* presented a compelling understanding of colonial repression and national liberation.

Most significantly, films produced by, for, and in the Third World became available. Films from Cuba, Latin America, and Africa presented a new political militancy and boosted the growing native U.S. opposition to the Vietnam War and expanded anti-imperialist consciousness. The presence of these new voices encouraged broadening of the audience and issues, as well as speaking in new ways to newly emerging political movements: Black Civil Rights, Chicano farm labor organizing, the student movement, the antiwar movement, and the beginnings of a Second Wave feminism. And younger radicals often began the important task of recovering the lost and repressed history of earlier militant activism that had been suppressed by the Cold War by recovering and exhibiting films such as *Salt of the Earth* (1954) by blacklisted makers

And by making films about the militant past such as *Union Maids* and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*.

This movement changed in the 1970s, in part because of changing politics, in part because of changing conditions, and with the arrival of new faces and new perspectives, the world of radical film continued to evolve. New work continued to be made, but often under different circumstances. That transition was complicated. For example, while initially broad based and shaped by socialist feminists, the Women's Movement was often weakened by domination by white liberal feminists who tied it to the Democratic Party, and who ignored women of color or rejected cultural lesbian feminism. It took time, and "the long way around" to bring this diversity back together. I want to quickly point this out here, the actual history and politics are complicated, and I don't want to get into a contest about it. But it is important to note that movements change. The gay liberation movement for example, went from being a relatively simple civil rights and cultural hub to becoming increasingly political with the AIDS crisis. And the films made in, with, and by emerging forces also changed: the Black Movement after the end of the Black Panthers, and so forth.

Throughout the Reagan and Bush Era (1980-1992) radical filmmaking continued but in a broadening stream. Part of this reflected new social and political movements, part of this resulted from advances made in television and journalism to represent women and minorities, and part of this resulted from newer technologies making production and distribution easier, quicker, and cheaper. The shift to video in broadcast and professional making as well as in alternative and grass roots media allowed for vastly different shooting ratios, quicker turn around for news production. We might remember the Vietnam War that appeared to U.S. dinner tables in the 60s was shot on film and shipped to the U.S. for processing and editing. When combined with satellite transmission, video allowed for real time coverage of events. And the new delivery system of videocassettes grew through the 1980s to allow radical "film" to be seen easily in many new spaces: the home, the workplace, the school, the community center, the gathering of friends.

With this understanding, let me underline the title of my talk: imagining change. I think this is a useful way to think about the "radical" in "radical film." Media that helps us and others imagine that change is needed, that it is possible, and what it might look like. Thus radical film should be understood as a spectrum of possibilities and examples. During the darkest days of Bertolt Brecht's exile from



Salt of the Earth (Biberman, 1954)



Union Maids (Julia Reichert, Miles Mogulescu, and Jim Klein, 1976). *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980)

Nazi Germany, he wrote about what people within Hitler's realm could do to resist within a totalitarian dictatorship: talk about change. Against the "Thousand Year Reich," the playwright said simply reminding people of dialectics, of contradiction and inevitable change, broke the power of the dictator.

We can use the same idea to form an encompassing view of radical media today. What works to help people imagine change? Certainly it's easy to see how short militant works targeted at specific campaigns such as the fight for a higher minimum wage, or against a pending change to environmental policy should be included here. But it's also the case that within the weekend multiplexes, in the past few years we can find films that point to the necessity for change and the possibility of change: Academy award winner *Moonlight* and box office hit *Get Out* are cases in point.

Indeed, we are living in a remarkable period of media that recognizes black America. Consider: *Hidden Figures*, *Loving*, *Fruitvale Station*, *Tangerine*, *The People Versus O. J. Simpson*; *O.J.: Made in America*; *Selma*, *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

But as you can see, I've already moved beyond my initial longitudinal survey of notable films into my ideas about the larger context of the world surrounding the individual film and about technological change. So let me pivot to that.



Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016)



Get Out (Jordan Peele, 2017)

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The radical film artworld

The dominant tendency in thinking about radical film is to concentrate on the work itself as an aesthetic and communicative object, and usually on the filmmaker, the auteur, and his/her achievement as genius. This is understandable: it is what most often gets attention when a new film is released. It starts the publicity ball rolling. It fits the need that film has to justify itself in relation to what are often more highly regarded fields of serious writing, investigative journalism, and traditional arts. Filmmakers are artist-creators too!

But this tendency also obscures the absolutely essential parts of the process from funding to exhibition. Consider funding. Gathering the resources to begin to make creative work takes time, talent, and money, money, money. Where does this money come from? How can we find it? (BTW, I don't have the answer, but let me know if you'd like to finance a project I have in mind.) And beyond the first step of finance, how do we actually assemble the creative and craft talents to begin production? That involves training, experience, and learning to work together. It means organizing a complex process that must be continually reassessed and guided on the fly. And then, when we get to a finished product, how do we get the work distributed and exhibited? All of these stages of film making are essential and often difficult, sometimes stopping projects before they are finished. And it's even more complicated with radical political film. The inevitable ebb and flow of real world politics changes the media world. Projects begun under one set of circumstances can be sidelined as conditions change, different forces emerge, as events overtake initial projections.

I want to emphasize this because to focus too much on the individual film and filmmaker can lead to failing to plan for and account for the difficulties of the process. How many of us older folks can remember projects that went on for years without reaching completion, or which were functionally dead on arrival due to changing political situations? And how many younger folks saw a Kickstarter that got out of the starting gate but failed to complete the race? Or works which failed to speak effectively to an intended audience? I say this not to scold, but to ask us, all of us, to wisely manage our projects. Dreams and good intentions are not enough. Hard shell realism needs to balance the hopes. So, we need to think of the whole process, to take the wide view of radical film projects.

To get films seen, noticed, and talked about requires distribution and exhibition. And in most cases in the U.S. those functions must be conducted as a business, even if a nonprofit business. That makes it a volatile sector, but over the years a fairly stable network of festivals, has developed such as the Worker's Unite Festival beginning Friday Night here in NYC. For decades now, a wide range of other festivals covering feminist film, black and African film, LGBTQ film, Latino and Latin American film, social justice issues, have expanded both as independent projects and sometimes tied to multifaceted organizations.

And progressive distributors have managed to find and maintain a place. Some such as Icarus, aimed at the education market, and Sut Jhally's Media Education Foundation, which makes media criticism videos targeted to classrooms. Others such as New Day, Women Make Movies, Frameline (LGBTQ issues) and Third World Newsreel and California Newsreel also have had long legs, continuing for decades. And a salute to Chicago's Kartemquin Films which just celebrated 50 years of producing films on political and social issues.

Another dimension of distribution should be considered: the deliberate screening and discussion model of a targeted political campaign. Perhaps the best model for this in the U.S. was Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (David Guggenheim, 2006). While essentially a flashy illustrated lecture on man-made global warming, the finished film was shown theatrically, but more importantly in local and community based venues. In Chicago where I lived at the time, there were dozens upon dozens of screenings in churches sponsored by social justice committees, in community centers and schools, and so forth. By widespread DVD distribution, a small group screening with a discussion afterwards educated and enlisted viewers in a way to connect immediately to appropriate neighborhood action: "Think Globally, Act Locally" in practice. From finance to end point activism, the project was conceived and executed thoughtfully and effectively.

And following the U.S. propensity for DIY (Do It Yourself) independent institutions, we also have a variety of projects ranging from the more recently expanded and evolved Flaherty Film Seminars to important local spaces and programs such as UnionDocs here in the city, as well as venues such as Anthology Film Archives, film exhibition by MoMA, the Whitney, and other museums. Similar exhibition spaces exist across the US, many run as a labor of love or in the precarious world of indie funding. Related to this in the past two decades we've seen the development of two new models often called "nomads and settlers." This refers to the practice of independent artist/makers regularly touring with their new work, finding venues and helpers/supporters across a wide geographic spectrum, and also the practice of local micro-cinemas, pocket sized exhibition spaces in a home, loft, or studio, storefront, or gallery that bring together and bond intimate viewing and discussion, often with the makers present.

And it is also important to recognize the work of writers who and publications which attend to radical films. A film may be shown, but knowledge of it needs to be spread, amplified, by journalists and critics writing about it, explaining and evaluating it, and letting others know about it. Since the 1960s that role has often been taken up by writers for the weekly papers (now in a state of decline) and more recently by online centers such as Indymedia (indymedia.org). Special mention should go to two publications that have sustained attention to radical media for decades: *Cineaste*, now 50 years old, and my own publication, *JUMP CUT*, for which all issues are available free online at www.ejumpcut.org. Reading back issues of both is one of the best ways to understand the rich and varied history of radical media in the US.

Fortunately for all of us, some people do that: media curators, archivists, preservationists, historians, and teachers organize and maintain at their best, the vital knowledge of past achievements and failures. They help move forward without reinventing the wheel. And I'd like to recommend to all of us here, and especially the younger people, that can be refreshing and inspiring to learn from the dynamic past of radical film. I've attached a select bibliography that indicates some starting points for your own exploration.

So, with that attempt to open up our field to not only time and history, but also expand it laterally, beyond just films and filmmakers, to account for the broad network which is necessary for radical film to exist and thrive, I want to pivot back. But first, an aside now that will become important later. We need to remember that the "radical" in radical film is always pertinent to a context and contingent on history. Something not originally intended as political can become so. A classic example: Hollywood made a fast paced thriller in 1979, *The China Syndrome*, in which a nuclear power plant begins a crisis meltdown. The film wasn't made to be radical (though it clearly marks the villains as big energy corporations that short cut safety regulations for a buck, and it starred Hollywood progressives Jane Fonda, Jack Lemon, and Michael Douglas).

But it became radical in the activist sense when, 12 days after release, there was a



The China Syndrome (1979)

nuclear energy plant incident at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania. Suddenly an entertainment film became the focal point for the public imagination of disaster, and anti-nuke activists were able to effectively leaflet at screenings and get their message across.

The point I want to make here is that a specific work can become unexpectedly politicized. But the reverse is also true: an intentionally political project can self-sabotage if it can't change with the time. When a project takes years and years, the fundamental situation on the ground may change and thus the completed work may no longer be topical or even very relevant. For radical media, "windows open, and windows close."

New forms, new technologies, new makers

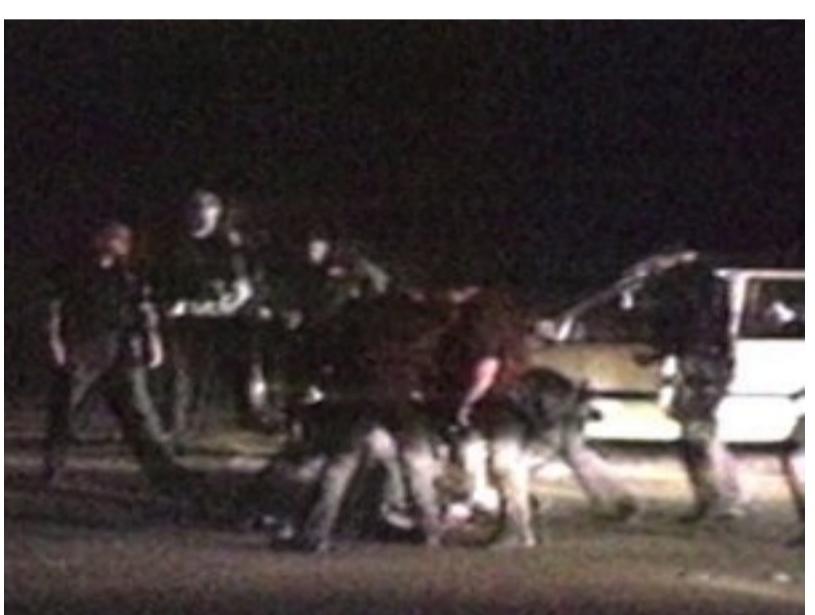
If we say that neoliberalism became the dominant aggressive form of capitalist exploitation and governance beginning in the Thatcher-Reagan era, we can also say that moment marks a new direction in the world of radical media. The arrival of consumer format video, of digital media, internet and streaming has changed the game. One the one hand, neoliberalism wants to invade the commons and monetize it, to shred the social net and privatize it, to make each individual an individual consumer in order to sell more, extract more value. On the other hand, by giving individuals more tools and more chances, a new basis emerges for grass roots activity.

We see the results of these changes in some dramatic ways. For example, ten years into the introduction of the home video camera, we have the footage of Los Angeles police beating motorist Rodney King captured and replayed again and again on the news.

The resulting trial of the officers resulted in their acquittal and following that the four day long Los Angeles Riots. Subsequently, the O. J. Simpson murder trial took place and was broadcast in its entirety by a new cable channel, Court TV, and the networks followed suit. These events mark a new era in media use to document politically charged moments, and to make previously obscured government processes suddenly open. Of course we now know where that takes us: to cellphone cameras that allow widespread capture of challenging images, of personal communication devices that allow for rapid mobilization of opinion and gathering for action.

It also opens new possibilities for youth and community media. (A good example was presented at the RFN conference with L.A.'s Echo Park Film Center.) The tools of media production are now potentially in the hands of many more people who can bring their own perspectives and issues to the fore. I point at this change as something we need to understand, not because I think that new media is going to remake political reality: the optimistic projections of the "Arab Spring" have now settled down to a sober estimation of practical power and the force of repression on citizens. But the diversity we see as a result of many new voices, and new makers, is apparent in radical work from the 1990s on. Sometimes this takes the form of dramatic narrative film, the most familiar type of storytelling, but it can also take performative shape as with mediated versions of music, dance, visual art, spoken word, and embodied action.

Formerly the main line of radical film development was the model of the classic social documentary, with a sobriety of investigation, a modeling of clarity through organized persuasion, a point of view even if not an omniscient narrator guiding us along. That changed in the 1990s in the wake of Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) which investigated a serious (and still present) issue: the disastrous decline of the General Motors factory town of Flint, Michigan, with a goofy host whose own personality was much of the center of attention. As a Sundance film, a full length theatrical success, it became a model for many aspiring documentary



Rodney King footage (George Holliday, 1991)



Michael Moore, *Roger and Me* (1989)

filmmakers.

The very terms of documentary film began to shift, something that was caught up in successive stages of the series of Visible Evidence documentary film conferences where a vastly expanded understanding of reality based cinema was presented, argued, and debated, and in the newly invigorated programming of the Flaherty Film Seminars which also offered a broader and more diverse selection.

Today Internet distribution and streaming delivery have created new possibilities for delivery of radical content. Particularly with video blogs, new voices have been empowered to add their issues and creativity to important issues. Much of this is in flux and varies with degrees of access and quality of service, but we are definitely in a time where interactive media is an active presence that radicals can use. We have the new practice of i-docs, interactive documentary that can expand the range of voices speaking to an issue, voices which often come from activists who use a website based on the documentary as a resource for collective social action.

Conclusion

I want to reflect on an earlier point I made, the one about the need to understand radical media in terms of a broad production concept and also to think about actual effects and political efficacy and impact. When new work appears, all the attention is on the film itself and understandably the maker. But there's little discussion of projects that are never completed, or which fail to find an audience, or which don't serve an ongoing real world political campaign. But we need to do postmortems. We see that often painful, and sometimes unpleasant task proceeding in the wake of our Presidential election, and in the UK, post-Brexit. It is not easy to analyze and discuss failure, but it is necessary if we are going to move forward, to learn from our mistakes and losses, and find a new and better strategy to succeed next time, to make new work to rise to the challenge, and to actually have a career, to have a long term commitment to radical change that we can live with and live through. That's not easy, but learning from the past can help us imagine change in the future.

Some notes on radical art/ experimental/avant garde media

This came up in the Q&A and requires a more elaborate discussion. To give a very concise response, I'd highlight several matters.

First, the nature of art itself is to contribute to a radical and humanizing understanding and experience. In that sense, art is an aspiration, and a form of expression for both the individual and the collective.

At the same time, we've seen, sometimes, art turned by commerce and politics into arch-conservative and fascistic modes, consumer advertising, and bulwarks of the dominant systems. And we've also seen a tendency to overgeneralizing and simplifying the "subversive" nature of art by looking at its rule-breaking, convention-defying, and taboo-crossing aspects too simplistically.

Media artists, like others in the art world, often stand at a tangent to the social and political mainstream. Due to a common precarity in work and income, to openness to expressing alternative values in art and lifestyle, and to an entrenched skepticism or disrespect for received wisdom and conventional pieties, artists have an affinity for radical dissent that takes on form and content, aesthetics and politics.

It's sometimes claimed against artist created work that the form is too strange or confusing to speak to a broad audience. And we've all seen examples of artists so wrapped up a narcissistic devotion to individual self-expression that they can't speak except to an existing coterie. But I've also seen many examples of artists using an innovative and even strange form to make a new kind of expression, one that can cross over. In fact, I've observed that if an audience strongly desires to learn about something, they find new form no particular hindrance to understanding the work at hand.

It's worth remembering that by the start of WW2, many artists in Central Europe moved to the U.S., and that New York replaced Paris as the center of world art. This infusion of new talent included media arts, and NYC remained the prime city for artists around the world after the war. In a significant way this shapes the understanding of experimental media art while also providing a rich stew for the continuing interaction of film artists with painters, performers, dancers, musicians, writers, inspiring both a bohemian camaraderie and the productive intersection of political movements and cultural subcultures.

Through the postwar era avant-garde film had a small but growing audience, but a "starving artist" base of creative makers. Unlike the consecrated arts of the museum and gallery artworld, where a painting, say, was a valuable and unique object, being a mass reproducible art, film didn't have an object to sell, or collect. Media artists had to have a trust fund, a supportive spouse or patron, or a teaching job or other administrative position, or salable craft skills, or a day job to make a living.

And experimental cinema's hallmark was the theatrical experience: gathering together with others. This began to change in the Sixties and Seventies. Part of the taboo and subversive qualities began to evaporate with the gradual legalization of commercial pornography. Another development, technological, changed things. The arrival of video by the 1990s created a new spatial variation for viewing. The "white box" of the modern gallery began to contain a "black box" area for continuous video screenings during an exhibition. By the Millennium, and the arrival of high definition digital video on flat screens easily used in normal light settings, painters and sculptors and other unique object artists, on their own, or encouraged by gallery owners and curators, began to include screen art in their shows. But unlike the earlier sanctity of the experimental film or video screened theatrically to an attentive audience viewing each work as a whole, the current mode of screen art in galleries is mostly just moving wallpaper, a decorative background for people passing through the space, spending a couple of minutes or less on any one screen. This itself changes any potential for a "radical" content or experience.

In the current period, we must not simply consider the aesthetics of media art, but also the economics of the art market under neoliberal capital. The acceleration of economic inequality shapes the lives, practices, and horizons of media artists. As cultural workers they face increasing precarity. And yet as more wealth accumulates to the 1%, we see a new Gilded Age, exemplified by Trump and his obsession with gold decoration. Trump's tastes are nouveau riche vulgar. But his class also uses the art market to absorb some of its capital. Art collections are viewed less as cultural artifacts than investment properties. Buying whatever is at the Biennale is a secure investment, perhaps even more than acquiring fine watches or jewelry. The expectation is that the art market will accumulate in value through both the reputation of artists and galleries.

Curiously, even when the means of art involve mechanical mass reproduction (such as Warhol's silk screen printing, or Barbara Kruger's early work of lithographs) these can be turned to rare unique items through appropriate recording of provenance, or printing on elite materials and limiting copies. Perhaps the most notorious example would be Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster*

Cycle (1994-2002), a set of films about 7 hours long in total, which was released as a limited series of 20 sets of DVDs which sold for at least \$100,000 as fine art.

I think there will always be a skepticism between artists and political activists. This can be healthy and productive in the long run, but it needs to be accounted for in an organizing sense. Artists tend to be individualistic, even when often working collectively in art to produce work, and to be wary of truisms and taken for granted assumptions. As with other creative intellectuals, media artists want to challenge and test ideas. This independence or orneriness is a problem for political activists seeking to get people in motion.

The always already issue of race in the U.S.

It should go without saying that in the U.S. race and class must always be talked about together.

After my talk one participant mentioned his own work showing the films of Oscar Micheaux, the pioneer black filmmaker. To dramatize the point he said he didn't want to see D. W. Griffith's famous/notorious film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). I understand the emotional sentiment, and support recognition and screening of Micheaux's work, but I'd also say that everyone committed to radical film must also study and understand the power of racist works such as *Birth of a Nation*, as well as the historical context of black and progressive efforts to counteract the film. In other words, we can't just promote an alternative, we must also actively critique the dominant. Thus the radical critique of Hollywood always has a place, if only in a "know your enemy" sense. But there's something else to be said here. Micheaux is not automatically transparent to today's audience, black and white and other. Fortunately, a rich collection of historical, scholarly, and critical work has been produced in the last few decades to provide a necessary background.

A new DVD collection from Kino Lorber makes an extensive collection of early African American cinema readily available. Curated by Charles Musser and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* is a 5 disc set of "race films" produced by black filmmakers from the 1920s-1940s. Indispensible.

Another recent addition to our collective knowledge is *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart. It's the print face of a distinguished archival effort to do justice to the Los Angeles based black media artists of the 1970s and 80s. Archiving and restoration of creative work was accompanied by in depth interviews with the makers. Here in the book, we find a serious reassessment of the movement, its ambitions and its accomplishments. (Full disclosure: I have an essay in the collection.)

[Editor's note. Chuck Kleinhans wrote his plans for this essay here. He passed away before he could complete them. This talk, the Q&A, and Alex Juhasz's introduction can be seen on video online at <https://vimeo.com/217835400?ref=fb-share>]

Separate bibliography to follow. This is a draft version posted on academia.edu on 17 May 2017. Posted at: <https://northwestern.academia.edu/ChuckKleinhans>

A revised version will be prepared for the projected *Radical Film Handbook*, ed. Steve Presence and Mike Wayne. This essay may be referenced and quoted if noted as a draft version (include date).

